

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Public Information Department, 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340

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PRESS RELEASE

DREADFUL FIRE! BURNING OF THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT
September 26 - November 4, 1984

The British nation experienced the burning of its Houses of Parliament in London on the night of October 16, 1834, as an immense loss. Called by an anonymous correspondent to The Gentleman's Magazine "a spectacle at once sublime and appalling," the conflagration attracted the attention, according to The Times of London, "not only of the passengers in the streets, but if we may judge from the thousands of persons who in a few minutes were seen hurrying to Westminster, of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the metropolis."

The Cleveland Museum of Art commemorates the 150th anniversary of this devastating event in British history with a special exhibition of paintings, watercolors, and prints by J.M.W. Turner. Perhaps England's greatest painter, Turner was particularly stirred by the fire and depicted it with flair, imagination and sensitivity. The exhibition assembles for the first time a significant body of the material many scholars believe the artist created in response to the fire: four of nine watercolor studies and a more finished watercolor from the British Museum, a watercolor vignette from the Museum of Outdoor Arts, Englewood, Colorado, and two major oil paintings, one owned by the Cleveland Museum, the other by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (A sketchbook of slight pencil notations and the five remaining watercolor studies, also in the British Museum collection, will not be included.)

The exhibition was conceived and organized by Katherine Solender, assistant curator in the Museum's Department of Art History and Education, initially to center on the Cleveland painting. Evan H. Turner, who has long had a scholarly interest in the painter and became Museum director in 1983, expanded the exhibition's

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scope and negotiated all loans. On view in Cleveland from September 26 through November 4, 1984, it was made possible with the support of the Ohio Arts Council. The exhibition will also be shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from November 16, 1984, through January 6, 1985.

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The crowds thronging the streets the night of the fire were rushing to witness the destruction of a part of their national identity. The buildings that clustered on the bank of the Thames River at Westminster were nearly synonymous with British history. Parliament first began meeting on the site in the thirteenth century, during the reign of Henry III (1216-1272). But even before that, Canute the Great, a Danish king who ruled England by right of conquest from 1017 to 1035, made his home there, as did subsequent kings until Henry VIII abandoned Westminster Palace in 1529. Westminster Hall, erected in the eleventh century by King William Rufus (1089-1100), housed the chief English courts of law and had witnessed such momentous events as the deposition of Richard II in 1399, the trial of Sir Thomas More in 1535, and the installation of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector in 1653.

By the 1830s, however, the Westminster Palace complex had so aged and spread that it was, in the words of historian R.J.B. Walker, "a labyrinth of intricately connected courts, residences, state rooms, office accommodations, libraries, chapels, armament rooms, law courts, coffee houses, kitchens, and so on, linked by a multitude of narrow, gloomy and unhealthy passages" This ancient survivor was, contemporary commissions warned, especially vulnerable to the threat of fire.

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When a couple of workmen were careless in burning some old "tallies" --notched wooden sticks that had, until 1826, been used to keep treasury accounts--it's not surprising then that the structure caught fire. And when it did, flames mounted rapidly. By 8:00 pm, the roofs had caved in on both the Houses of Lords and of Commons. The shattering glass and splintering wood sounded to the witnesses like gunpowder exploding in the roaring fire. At 1:00 am, although the worst damage had already been done, the view from Westminster Bridge and the river was still spectacular, and the firefighters were not able to rest until five that morning. Almost miraculously, Westminster Hall stood relatively unscathed, but much of the complex was ravaged.

Many spectators felt, like The Gentleman's Magazine correspondent, that their national existence was being "burst asunder" along with the historic buildings. Others in the crowd saw the destruction as a well-deserved punishment for recent parliamentary action, including the resistance of the Lords to the controversial Reform Act introducing electoral changes in 1832 and the infamous Poor Law that established the hated workhouse system in 1834. But those of all political stripes were so awed by the sheer power of the fire and grandeur of the burning buildings that, in the words of The Gentleman's Magazine, "they involuntarily...clapped their hands, as though they had been present at some closing scene of some dramatic spectacle"

The visual drama of smoke, flame, river, and moonlit sky was certainly not lost on the many artists in the crowd that night. In fact, the porter of the Royal Academy is said to have alerted students in the library with the words, "Now, gentlemen; now, you young architects, there's a fine chance for you! the Parliament house is all afire." Many newspaper illustrators and printmakers were about, making sketches for the prints that appeared subsequently in papers and single sheet broadsides.

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One eyewitness was Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). Drawn throughout his career to portraying such disasters and catastrophes as fire, flood, snowstorm, and avalanche, Turner was deeply moved by this first-hand experience of the destructive power of nature. He apparently stayed on the scene all night, viewing the fire for a time from a boat on the Thames with several Academy students. The results were the pencil notations and watercolor studies that may record his more immediate response to the fire, as well as the finished watercolor, the watercolor vignette, and two oil paintings.

The two oil paintings--the centerpieces of this exhibition--make a striking juxtaposition. In both the form of the subject dissolves into brilliant, evanescent color, but each offers a different perspective. The Cleveland picture takes the view from downriver, showing the fire at a distance, while the Philadelphia version takes one directly across the river from the buildings, with Westminster Bridge appearing prominently at the right. Four of the watercolor studies from Turner's sketchbook and the finished watercolor experiment with basic color schemes and compositions. The studies seem to present distant views of the fire and its reflection on the river, while the finished watercolor shows the burning buildings closeup from the Palace yard, which is jammed with a crowd of onlookers. The watercolor vignette depicts the fire from the river, through the curve of an arch of Westminster Bridge. To be displayed alongside the vignette is an engraving of it that appeared in the 1836 edition of The Keepsake, a popular poetry annual which has been loaned by Freiburger Library of Case Western Reserve University.

Additional photographic material places these works of art in an historical context. Photoreproductions of some of Turner's earlier and later paintings with disaster subjects, along with five prints by the artist owned by the

Cleveland Museum, locate the Parliament pictures within his life's work. A number of the journalistic prints that were sold to a wide public during the period immediately following the fire will also be photoreproduced, to give a sense of the contemporary reaction to the event. In addition, a small painting of the fire by an anonymous English artist, on loan from the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, suggests the more conventional artistic response to an event that Turner's special talents captured so dramatically.

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An illustrated catalogue written by Katherine Solender is available. Lectures and other educational programs accompany the Cleveland showing of the exhibition. On Wednesday, October 17, at 5:45 pm, Charles F. Stuckey, contributing editor to Art in America and the American representative to the Turner Society, will speak on "Turner and Time." London dealer Evelyn Joll, a noted Turner authority and chairman of Thos. Agnew & Sons, will discuss "Turner: His Patrons and His Critics" on Wednesday, October 24, at 5:45 pm. Katherine Solender and Helen Borowitz, associate curator in the Department of Art History and Education, will present a slide lecture series, J.M.W. Turner: From the Literal to the Visionary, four Wednesdays at 2:15 pm, beginning October 10. From Wednesday, September 26, through Tuesday, October 2, Ms. Solender will give daily gallery talks at 1:30 pm in the exhibition. An explanatory slide program will run in the Museum's audio-visual center continuously throughout the exhibition, and a half-hour film about the artist's work will be shown on Wednesday, October 17, at 12:30 and also at 7:00 pm.

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For additional information, color slides, or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.